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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of the Southern Coalition for Educational Equity's New Orleans Effective Schools Project is to improve academic achievement at one middle school, Martin Behrman, in ways that can be replicated by schools facing similar problems. The Project is based on research findings about school improvement from the school effectiveness literature and focuses resources--primarily in-person assistance--on one school for a 5-year period. Martin Behrman Middle School was selected as the first Project School from among twelve "high risk" schools. In the fall of 1982, Behrman began its planning year, to be followed by three years of implementation. The goal of the planning year was to establish a Site Council representing all relevant constituencies and to develop a plan that would increase academic achievement over a three to five year period. During the first implementation year, at the request of the Site Council, project staff conducted a full day workshop on positive discipline and helped a committee of teachers develop a system of rules and consequences that included both preventive and punitive components. A management team was created to support the school administrative staff. Additionally, the Behrman Special Summer Program was implemented and achieved great success. The Summer Program provided five weeks of daily reading instruction to over 90 students. Final test results of the summer students demonstrated larger than expected gains in reading comprehension. In the Project's second year of implementation, it continued to build on changes begun during the first year. The College Board's reading comprehension test, Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) was administered to insure measurement of progress towards the goal of improved comprehension, and an outside expert prepared a report on the barriers to effective use of instructional time at Behrman. As the project enters the third year of implementation, it is ready to be replicated in similar "high-risk" schools. A network between Behrman and other schools will be developed, and the replication schools will be selected by the end of 1985. (KH)

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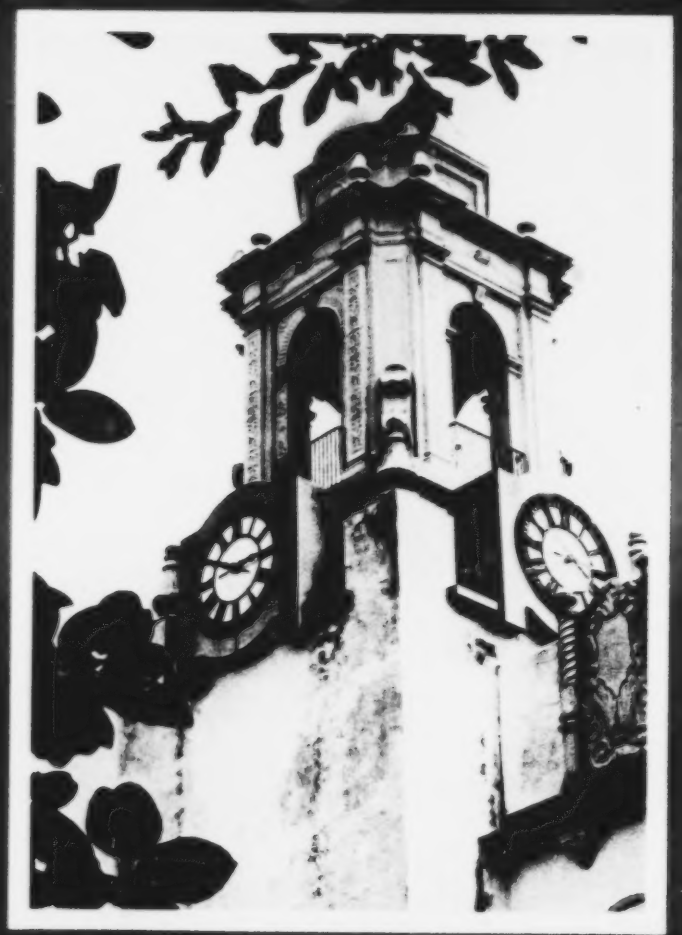

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"The most hopeful thing we've learned is the great potential for growth and improvement in public schools."

Barbara MacPhee, Director, New Orleans Effective Schools Project

Cover photo:
Bell Tower of Martin Behrman Middle School, the site school, located at 715 Opelousas Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana.

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Introduction

The primary goal of the Southern Coalition for Educational Equity's New Orleans Effective Schools Project is to improve academic achievement at one middle school, Martin Behrman, in ways that can be replicated by schools facing similar problems. Critical to the success of the Project is the unique partnership under which it operates — a partnership involving the Southern Coalition, the Orleans Parish School Board, the United Teachers of New Orleans, and of course, the staff and students of Behrman Middle School. The Project is proving to be an exciting and successful approach to school improvement as we near the end of our second year of work.

In the last few years, research and practice in school effectiveness have identified what the right conditions are for academic achievement for all students. They include high expectations for all students, a climate that fosters and rewards academic achievement, a safe and orderly environment, and strong leadership that maintains a focus on the quantity and quality of instruction.

As the school effectiveness literature has grown, researchers also have discovered more about how to change schools. This research points to the need to focus improvement efforts on the whole school instead of adding new programs. Interventions must also be sustained for several years; results will not be evident within a year or so. Finally, teachers are at the heart of any improvement effort. Research on staff development demonstrates that the most effective way to improve teaching practices is through repeated observation, feedback, and coaching in the classroom.

These compelling research findings guided the design of the New Orleans Effective Schools Project. The Project focuses resources — primarily in-person assistance — on one school for a five year period. The design for improving achievement is developed by a school-based site council composed of teacher, parent, student, and administrative representatives.

The role of Project staff is to facilitate and enable the plans of the site council to be implemented in an effective way. Project staff provide technical assistance directly to teachers as well as identify and bring in outside consultants and other resources. Project staff also work to involve parents and students in school activities and work closely with school staff to plan, implement and evaluate the school effectiveness program.

"Teachers are at the heart of any improvement effort."

The Coalition began planning this project in 1980 and formed a partnership with the New Orleans School Board and the United Teachers of New Orleans in 1981. In 1982, Martin Behrman Middle School was selected as the first Project school on the basis of a competition among the twelve schools that met the "high risk" criteria.

The 1982-83 school year was the planning year for the Behrman Project to be followed by three years of implementation. This report summarizes Project activities through the middle of the second year of implementation and plans for the future.

The Southern Coalition for Educational Equity

The goal of the Southern Coalition for Educational Equity is to make public schools effective and humane institutions that increase options for all students. Founded by Winifred Green in 1978, the Coalition is a nonprofit organization, incorporated in the State of Georgia, that operates in eleven southern states.

The Coalition is a unique organization in the south with its emphasis on eliminating both racism and sexism from public schools and in making schools into truly effective learning environments for all students. As the only southern organization working solely on the issue of education in eleven states, the Coalition works cooperatively with teachers, administrators, parents, and students as well as citizens and groups concerned with issues of public education.

Knowing with certainty that public schools can work for all children, the Coalition works every day to demonstrate this through projects designed to increase educational opportunities. In addition to the Behrman Effective Schools Project, described in this report, the Coalition's current projects include:

- Demonstrating new ways of combining basic education, job training, and work experience for minorities and single parents in Arkansas.
- Increasing the numbers and effectiveness of women and minorities in leadership positions in elementary and secondary public schools across the South.
- Developing a model for providing computer literacy and increasing analytical thinking skills of minority students in Georgia and North Carolina.

The Coalition carries out its work with funding from private foundations, corporations, and individual donors. Each project is designed to demonstrate effective solutions which can then be adopted by public and private institutions from state agencies and school districts to business and industry.

"The Southern Coalition is a unique organization in the south with its emphasis on eliminating both racism and sexism from public schools and in making schools into truly effective learning environments for all students."

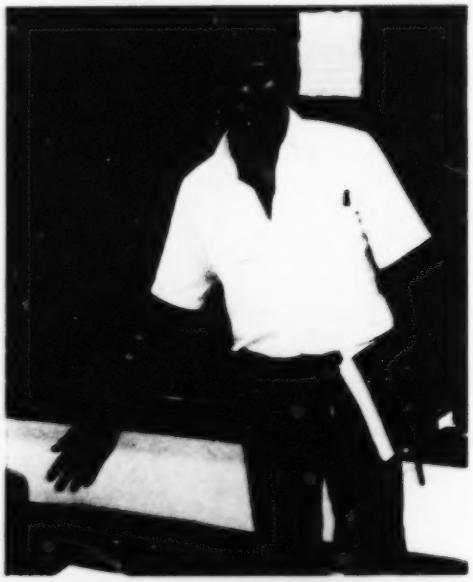
Forming A Partnership In New Orleans

Measurable school improvement does not occur overnight. It takes time, resources, and, most importantly, the commitment of the many people and agencies involved in public education. For this reason, the Coalition only undertakes projects in cooperation with the people and organizations in which the project will be implemented. Forming partnerships among those concerned with improving education greatly enhances the likelihood for success.

The Coalition began planning the New Orleans Effective Schools Project in 1980. For over a year Coalition staff worked with school and community members in New Orleans and in other cities to define the process for achieving school effectiveness. After hundreds of consultations, the Coalition approached the Orleans Parish School Board and the United Teachers of New Orleans to ask if they would form a partnership with the Coalition to implement the proposed project.

Based on the interest expressed and culminating in unanimous approval from the School Board and support from the United Teachers, the Coalition chose New Orleans as the first site for this project. To finance the project, the Coalition sought and obtained foundation support from the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the D.H. Holmes Foundation of New Orleans, the RosaMary Foundation, and the Southern Education Foundation.

"Measurable school improvement does not occur overnight. It takes time, resources, and the commitment of the many people involved in public education."



School Selection And Planning

Because the middle grades are so often overlooked in improvement efforts, the Coalition chose to concentrate on middle or junior high schools. Twelve middle and junior high schools in the New Orleans Public Schools were identified as "high risk" through an analysis of factors including CTBS scores, absenteeism, percent of students eligible for free lunch and AFDC eligibility.

All twelve schools were invited to apply for selection as the site for the New Orleans Effective Schools Project. Seven of the twelve developed an application proposal that required staff to assess their strengths and weaknesses and to agree to begin a process of designing their own improvement strategies.

A committee representing the Coalition, the United Teachers, the central school administration, and a parent interviewed each principal and met with the faculties of the three finalists. The enthusiastic approval of Behrman staff to actively participate in a project requiring extra time and effort weighed heavily in their favor. In May, 1982 Martin Behrman Middle School in Algiers was selected as the first site for the New Orleans Effective Schools Project.

In the fall of 1982 Behrman began its planning year to be followed by three years of implementation. The goal of the planning year was to establish a Site Council representing all relevant constituencies and develop a plan that would result in increased academic achievement over a three to five year period.

With assistance from Coalition staff, the Site Council was formed with representatives from the teaching staff, parents, students, non-teaching staff, the principal, teachers' union and project staff. Meetings were held weekly throughout the 1982-83 school year.

The Site Council initially tackled issues of immediate concern: discipline and school climate. Planning changes in curriculum and instruction occurred primarily in subcommittee meetings with outside assistance from local college and university faculty.

By the end of the planning year, both project and school staff were ready to turn to action.

"In May, 1982 Martin Behrman Middle School in Algiers was selected as the first site for the New Orleans Effective Schools Project."

The First Implementation Year

A number of positive changes were introduced at Behrman during the first implementation year. The Site Council met on a regular basis to propose ideas and develop plans for their implementation.

In the area of discipline, several plans were developed and implemented. At the request of the Site Council, project staff designed a full-day workshop on positive discipline. The entire Behrman faculty participated along with several parents and students. A committee of teachers, with assistance from project staff, developed a system of rules and consequences which included plans for an after-school detention and in-house suspension. The goal was a system with both preventive and punitive components.

In addition, through project efforts, Atari donated four microcomputers to Behrman — its first microcomputers. These are used by Behrman students as a resource and supplement to their classroom activities.

In an effort to strengthen leadership at Behrman, much of the first year's effort was devoted to supporting the administrative staff. For example, before the first implementation year began, the project underwrote the principal's participation in a three-week course in school leadership at Vanderbilt University.

Once the school year began, project staff instituted a Management Team, with the principal's concurrence, as another vehicle for providing the school administrators with support and assistance. The Management Team met throughout the school year. In addition, the Project established a peer support group for the principal composed of principals in schools similar to Behrman.

At the end of the first year of implementation, the principal of Behrman retired. As non-voting members of the selection committee, project staff participated in the selection of a new principal.

"A number of positive changes were introduced at Behrman during the first year of implementation."

The Behrman Special Summer Program

Demonstrable success is a rare outcome from interventions designed to increase academic achievement. Success is even rarer when the students are economically and educationally disadvantaged and rarer still when the students are early adolescents. The Behrman Special Summer Program, designed and implemented by the Project, is such a success story.

The Summer Program's primary goal was to increase the reading comprehension of 100 Behrman students. The Program ran a full five weeks after three days of intensive training for the teachers. Two of the six reading teachers were regular Behrman teachers. The training emphasized the Program's philosophy of high expectations and respect for students as well as classroom use of varied activities including writing in journals, silent reading, and individual reading conferences.

Following breakfast and a brief meeting of all students and faculty, from 9:00 to 12:00 each day students were in one of six reading classes, each with 15 to 20 randomly assigned students. Following lunch, students attended two one-hour classes of their choice: drama, music, art, dance, or swimming. In addition, students attended a computer lab on the premises several times a week in which they were introduced to writing with word processing. The lab was equipped with four microcomputers donated by Atari.

"Demonstrable success is a rare outcome from interventions designed to increase academic achievement. The Behrman Special Summer Program is such a success story."

Since participation in the program was voluntary, the mere fact that over 90 students signed up was itself indicative of their desire to learn. The fact that over two-thirds had perfect or near perfect attendance substantiates this interpretation, as does the near absence of behavior problems. A number of students who showed great progress and caused no trouble were in fact serious problem students at Behrman during the school year.

Demonstrable Success

The success of the Summer Program exceeded expectations. The test results demonstrated larger than expected gains in reading comprehension. The Degrees of Reading Power, a test developed by the College Board which measures only reading comprehension, was given to students on the first and last days of the Program — a five week interval. On the test's scale, students gained 8 units on the average which exceeds the gain expected for an entire school year.

Teacher evaluations of students showed considerable progress as well in areas not measured by test (such as oral and writing skills). Moreover, interviews with teachers indicated that the program was a valuable learning experience for them; teachers left the program with raised expectations for Behrman students as well as an array of new skills and ideas that they will use in their regular school year classes.

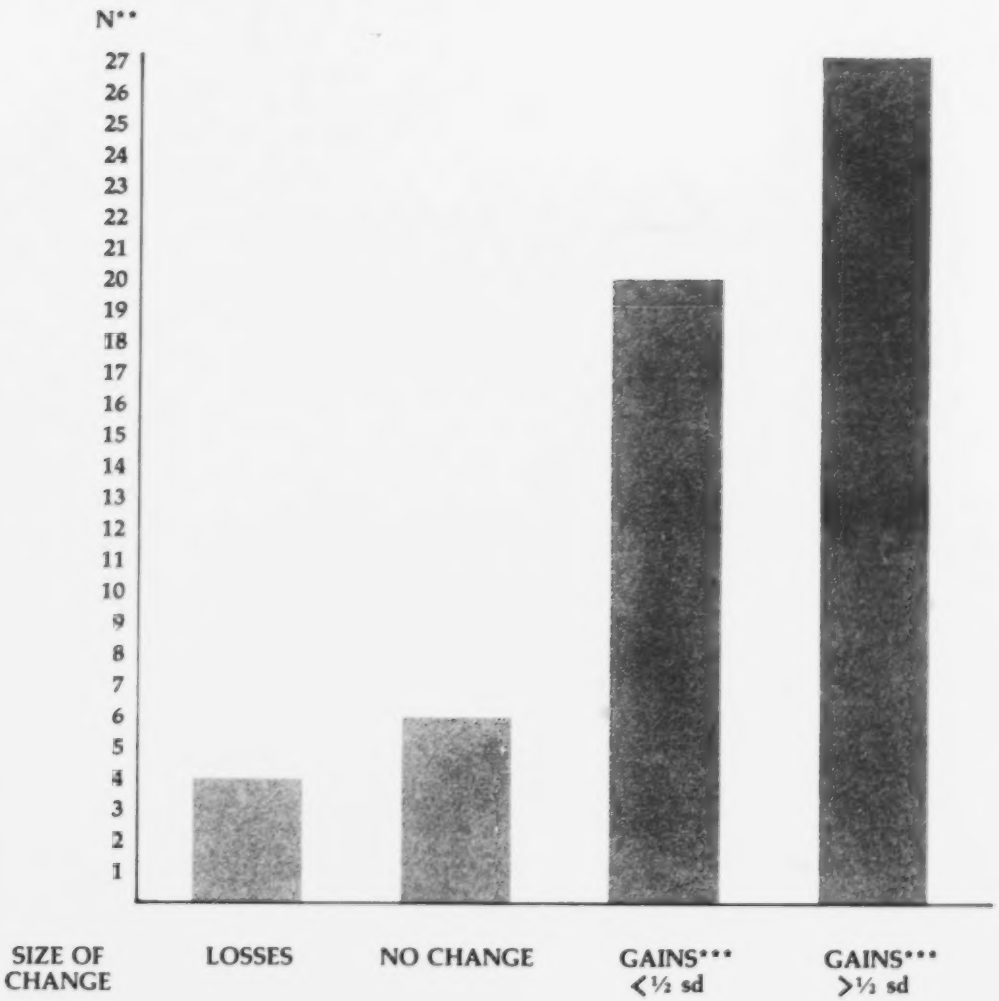
The Summer Program demonstrates that Behrman students are able to make great strides in achievement under conditions favorable to learning. In addition to creating an atmosphere that values academic growth, the main factors that led to achievement gains were:

- A dedicated teacher in charge of the program who works intensively with the teaching staff.
- A limited number of classes (pupil teacher ratio around 20 to 1).
- Long, uninterrupted blocks of instructional time (2½-3 hours).
- Resources and support for the teachers including books, materials, and copying facilities.

"The Summer Program demonstrates that Behrman students are able to make great strides in achievements under conditions favorable to learning."

On top of positive effects for students, the Summer Program proved to be an extremely successful professional development program for teachers. Given that students benefitted enormously, the Summer Program is a cost effective model for staff development as well as for student academic growth.

DEGREES OF READING POWER* CHANGE SCORES



* Degrees of Reading Power (DRP), which measures reading comprehension, is a trademark of The College Board.

** N=57 students who took both the pretest and the posttest.

*** Gains are divided into two categories: less than and greater than ½ of the standard deviation of the norming sample.

The Second Implementation Year

The second year of implementation continued building on changes begun during the first year. Under the strong leadership of the new principal, the school year began with attention directed to an emphasis on reading comprehension and increasing the quantity and quality of uninterrupted instructional time.

The College Boards' reading comprehension test, Degrees of Reading Power (DRP), was administered at the beginning of the school year to insure measurement of progress towards the goal of improved comprehension. The Project emphasizes the need to have measurable results. Hence it is very important to have a test that accurately measures reading comprehension. The DRP measures comprehension exclusively, in contrast to traditional standardized and competency tests that are tied to a much larger set of specific learning outcomes and hence place less emphasis on comprehension.

In addition, the DRP produces "readability" scores which prove extremely useful to teachers. A student's score on the DRP indicates at what level the student can read with comprehension. If students are given material significantly below their readability levels, they will be bored and will not increase their level of comprehension. Similarly, if students are assigned materials significantly beyond their readability level, their inability to understand the test will lead to frustration.

"Behrman Middle School has students who can and want to learn and a dedicated staff who want an instructionally sound school."

The College Board provides a service that determines the readability level of various textbooks and other reading materials. Once familiar with this procedure, teachers learn to judge readability levels for themselves.

To assist teachers in selecting materials at the appropriate level, the Southern Coalition purchased a large number of paperback books holding interest for the students and matching their readability levels.

To assist teachers in utilizing their classroom time efficiently, the Southern Coalition, in close collaboration with the principal, invited an outside expert observer to meet with teachers and observe their classes to determine the main barriers to effective use of instructional time. The observer met individually with teachers before and after the observations and prepared a report for use by school staff.

The observer reported that there is tremendous potential at Behrman for instructional effectiveness: the building is orderly, students and teachers are aware of the principal's strong leadership, attendance has improved, and the attitude of both staff and students is one of openness to learning. Areas needing improvement include better communication about reading as a top priority, more effective planning of lessons to include more varied activities and less reliance on textbooks, use of more higher level questioning (redirecting, probing and prompting), high expectations for students, and fewer classroom interruptions. The report concludes:

> **Behrman Middle School has students who can and want to learn and a dedicated staff who want an instructionally sound school. The substantial changes accomplished in the past year attest to that and should instill a strong sense of pride in everyone — staff, students, and community.**

The report was favorably received by school staff who are already taking steps to implement the recommendations. For example, outside interruptions during class time have already been reduced. The Site Council has begun a series of meetings to draw up a very specific plan for implementing the recommendations.

As the second implementation year draws to a close, the Behrman Effective Schools Project has moved substantially closer to achieving its initial long term goal of increasing the academic achievement of Behrman students. Intensive planning is now underway for a second Special Summer Program to build on the gains of last summer and this school year.

Analyses of the fall and spring DRP scores have just begun. Preliminary results are extremely encouraging. The difference between the fall and spring median scores is roughly 7 units; this significantly exceeds the expected school year gain of 3 to 5 units. In terms of grade levels, these scores suggest that the median Behrman student began the school year at a level similar to the end of fourth grade and ended the year at a level similar to the beginning of sixth grade. **The critical process of closing the gap between grade level and performance level is underway.**

Since a number of improvements were implemented near the end of the 1984-85 school year, project and school staff are even more optimistic about the progress to be made during the 1985-86 school year. **A clear and consistent focus on reading does pay off!**

Plans For Replication

As the Project at Behrman enters the third year of implementation, it is ready to be replicated in similar "high-risk" schools.

Replicating the Effective Schools Project is different from typical program replication in which a particular curriculum or teaching approach or set of materials is implemented in a number of schools. In the Effective Schools Project the essence of replication is establishing a process that will lead to school effectiveness. The emphasis is on creating the site council and developing and implementing an effectiveness plan — a plan that will be unique to each school.

Obviously, replication schools can learn from the experiences at Behrman and from each other. They can exchange ideas, problems, and solutions. Hence, one important aspect of replication is establishing a network between Behrman and the replication schools.

As was done in the selection of Behrman, a selection committee will be formed consisting of representatives of the central office, the teachers' union, Behrman staff and parents, and the Southern Coalition. In the fall of 1985, a new pool of eligible schools will be formed. The goal of the Project is to select two to three middle or junior high schools to begin implementing the Project in the spring of 1986.

"As the Project at Behrman enters the third year of implementation, it is ready to be replicated in similar "high risk" schools."

As with the first round of selection, eligibility will be based on indicators of "high risk" including test scores, absentee rates, percent of students on free lunch, suspension rate, and percent of parents active in PTA.

Once the pool of eligible schools has been determined, a description of the Project and letters of invitation will be sent to each school. Those indicating an interest in applying will send representatives, including the principal and building union representative, to an orientation sessions that explains the Project in full detail.

Participation requires evidence that both the principal and the teaching staff are committed to the goals of the Project. This initial support is critical to the eventual success

of the Project. Therefore, the application process will solicit evidence of this commitment, both through a brief survey of the teaching staff conducted by the building union representative and through the interview process.

Schools that choose to apply after the orientation session will be asked to submit evidence of commitment to Project goals as part of their application. Once the application is completed, district and Southern Coalition staff will meet with the entire faculty to answer questions about the Project.

The final stage of the selection process will consist of individual interviews with representatives of the school staff including the principal and the building union representative. The interviews will be conducted by the selection committee. On the basis of the application and the interviews, the selection committee will select two to three schools for replication.

The schedule calls for selecting the replication schools prior to the end of 1985. In January and February of 1986, Project staff will assist each replication school in forming a site council and in conducting an in-depth needs assessment. The assessment, including administration of the DRP, will form the basis on which the site council will begin developing a school effectiveness plan, with assistance from Project staff.

This schedule will ensure that the schools are ready to begin implementing improvements when school opens in the fall of 1986. It is hoped that funds will be available to continue and expand the Special Summer Program during the summer of 1986. Because the summer program is such a cost-effective approach to increasing reading comprehension and teaching skills, an expanded program could provide an excellent opportunity for staff and students in the replication schools to get off to a strong and inspiring beginning. To start the challenging process of school improvement with an experience rewarding to both teachers and students will provide energy and enthusiasm for the following school year's efforts.

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